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A mission for civilians

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Ambassador John Herbst with Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice

Conflict prevention, typically low on the Bush administration's to-do list, got a boost this summer when the U.S. State Department announced it was launching the Civilian Response Corps. From diplomats to sewer engineers, Uncle Sam hopes to ready teams of civilians who could use their expertise in fields such as governance, urban planning and public health to help restore stability to countries in crisis or emerging from conflict. Modeled after the U.S. military, the 4,250-strong civilian force would include active-duty members as well as reservists who could be deployed to hot spots within two to 90 days of a government order.

Although small and underfunded, the State Department program is part of the government's nonmilitary strategy for averting conflicts that can arise from weak and poorly governed nation states. In remarks made at the July launch of the Civilian Response Corps, Secretary of State Condoleezza Rice called such states the "defining challenge" of the foreseeable future because they provide "ungoverned spaces where violence and oppression can spread" and "where terrorists and extremists can gather, and plot, and train to kill the innocent."

Rice later added that supporting leaders and citizens who seek to rebuild after conflict, "often in a state not totally at war or totally at peace," is a mission civilians must lead.

The corps' launch comes amid a debate among decision-makers in Washington over what some call an imbalance in U.S. foreign policy between "soft" and "hard" power (see sidebar). Rep. Howard L. Berman, D-Calif., has described the combined budget for the State Department and the U.S. Agency for International Development as "anemic" when compared to defense spending. The Department of Defense's fiscal year 2008 budget was six times larger than the combined budgets of the Departments of Justice, State, Homeland Security and Treasury, the U.S. Agency for International Development, and the Office of the Director of National Intelligence.

The Civilian Response Corps' estimated start-up cost is $248.6 million, which Bush has requested for fiscal year 2009. This year, Congress allocated $75 million for the program,

enough to hire and train 100 full-time members and 500 standby members, said Ambassador John Herbst, coordinator for the State Department's Office of Reconstruction and Stabilization.

The office, which draws on the resources of eight federal agencies, including the Departments of Agriculture, Health and Human Services, and USAID, was established in 2004 to coordinate and develop the government's civilian capacity to "prevent or prepare for post-conflict situations."

According to Herbst, the corps would rely on three separate pools of trained and equipped civilians. The backbone of the force would be its 250-member Active Response Corps, comprised of federal employees, the majority of whom would come from USAID and the State Department. They would be the engineers, economists, public administrators, police officers and judges, "people who can oversee or actually provide basic services in a pinch," he said. Full-time hires, members of the Active Response Corps could be deployed on a two-day notice. They would be reinforced with a 2,000-strong Standby Response Corps, also federal employees, and 2,000 reservists, recruited from the private sector and state and local government. Similar to the military, civilian reservists would sign a four-year contract and commit to up to one year of service during that period.

Herbst estimates the corps could provide between 900-1,200 trained and equipped civilians within two months of the government's identifying a crisis. "They would ensure a single command and control structure for civilian operations, which would enable us to avoid some of the problems we had in Iraq and Afghanistan," he said. The civilian force could send smaller teams to avert a crisis in a country where U.S. interests are at stake. Deployment could occur during, after or in lieu of military operations.

Helping a government provide basic services while U.S. combat operations are still going on in the country is "very complicated," Herbst admitted. "But the fact that it is not easy to do does not mean it need not be done. Certainly the preference is to be engaged before the bullets start flying," he said, later emphasizing the civilian force was part of a multilateral effort. At least a dozen countries have offices "equivalent to our own," he said. Recruitment has started, and if Herbst's office receives the requested $248.6 million, it could "sprint" into operation, he said.

That's a significant "if." Funding for the Office of Reconstruction and Stabilization has remained tenuous. In 2006, in an attempt to jump-start the fledging program, Congress authorized the Department of Defense to transfer up to $100 million a year to the State Department for security, reconstruction and stabilization projects. In 2007, the Defense kitty supported seven projects, including a program to bolster police visibility in the Haitian slum of Cité Soleil, the clearing of unexploded ordnance in southern Lebanon, and an initiative to evaluate health and infrastructure needs in a region once controlled by the Colombian rebel group FARC.

But the Pentagon's money was not available for the development of the Civilian Response Corps. Prior to the $75 million from Congress, the tiny force had only 11 active-duty members.

The State Department program received cautious kudos from those working for nongovernmental organizations involved in peace-building. Bridget Moix, the legislative secretary for peaceful prevention of deadly conflict at the Friends Committee on National Legislation, said her office was encouraged by the program's focus on developing civilian tools for addressing the fragile aftermath of war. "Post-conflict peace-building is conflict prevention -- early prevention -- because 50 percent of all conflicts lapse back into violence after a ceasefire."

John Paul Lederach, professor of international peace-building at the Kroc Institute of Notre Dame University, was also positive in his "big picture" critique of the corps. Like Moix, he lauded the attention given to the postwar period.

"In the past, governments would only deploy high-level diplomats and armed peacekeepers, but the postwar situation presents a wide variety of challenges that require sets of people, skills, initiatives that don't exclusively fall in the level of those two groups," he said.

But Lederach thinks the program's time frame for conflict resolution is unrealistically short and he questions its impartiality. In a postwar setting, perceptions are important, he said, "and in Colombia, the U.S. is not perceived as an impartial broker." Lederach, who has written about the impact of U.S. counterterrorism policies on peace-building, said the government's refusal to work with groups listed as terrorists has impeded reconciliation efforts. "You have to ask what you mean by peace-building and reconciliation -- whether you mean engaging all the people who are part of the conflict or whether you are only including those who are part of your persuasion."

Lederach is among a number of development workers and leaders of nongovernmental organizations involved in peace-building who are concerned that U.S. foreign assistance is being subordinated to a single issue -- the war on terror. "Development and human rights should be funded on their own merits," said David Cortright, president of the Fourth Freedom Forum and senior fellow at the Kroc Institute. "If you do the work of sustainable development, defense of human rights and accountability, we will create a more secure environment."

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Analysts, relief workers decry militarization of aid

At a House Foreign Affairs Committee hearing on foreign assistance reform, held last April, policy analysts and relief workers spoke critically about the "decimation" of

civilian agencies and the increasing militarization of foreign aid. Today, the State Department has only 6,600 Foreign Service officers, which is reportedly less than the number of active military band members. Since the 1990s, the professional staff at the U.S. Agency for International Development has dwindled by one-third. The agency once known for its technical expertise now has five engineers. Half of the 1,820 professionals on staff work as generalists. Meanwhile the proportion of foreign assistance distributed by the Department of Defense has increased from 7 to 20 percent between 2001 and 2006.

The drop in civilian personnel has been accompanied by an increase in foreign assistance, much of it allocated for Iraq and Afghanistan. In written testimony for the April congressional hearing, Raymond Offenheiser, president of Oxfam USA, described USAID in Afghanistan as "overstressed and overstretched." The agency was being asked to manage a billion-dollar budget "with a skeletal staff," he wrote. "Instead of deepening their knowledge of the culture, politics, language and priorities of Afghans, USAID staff had time only to shovel funding out the door."

Secretary of Defense Robert Gates is among those calling attention to the civilian deficit. In a speech last November, Gates said, "The Department of Defense has taken on many of the burdens that might have been assumed by civilian agencies in the past. ... Forced by circumstances, our brave men and women in uniform have stepped up to the task, with field artillerymen and tankers building schools and mentoring city councils -- usually in a language they don't speak. ... But it is no replacement for the real thing -- civilian involvement and expertise."

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